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Introducing the Daybook

It is not a bad idea to get in the habit of writing down one's thoughts. It saves one having to bother anyone else with them.

—ISABEL COLEGATE

The daybook is a tool that we use in our daily lives with our students, as teacher researchers, as writers. It's the tool we use to muse over and investigate whatever is going on. It's a tool we use to learn and discover with our students.

As teachers, our goal is to empower our students and provide them with ways of learning that work best for them. Daybooks have helped us foster ways of learning that allow students the space and freedom to be silly and messy, to be thinkers and writers just for the sake of thinking and writing, to be miners of their thoughts even if just to dig out a golden line from something that they read.

The results are clear—we find that our students are successful in class, are prepared for tests or the next grade level, and, more importantly, are empowered by the joy of thinking and learning. Questions such as “why do I have to do this” are replaced by “listen to what I just wrote in my daybook.” When this happens, we know we’ve done our job.

This book is not one of those programs that “come from the mountain top” that make you wonder, “how long is this gimmick going to last?” And it’s not a book about writer’s notebooks or how to organize your teaching life. This is a book about a tool for lifelong learning: the daybook. The daybook is different from a writer’s notebook because it collects more than what might be used in a writing workshop, though you can use it there if you like. The daybook breaks down the typical disconnect that occurs in schools: disconnects between theory and practice, between one grade and the next, between one subject and another, and between the way people really learn and how we often feel obligated to make our students learn in very specific and predetermined ways.

Why Call It a Daybook?

Jim Burke (2007) has something he calls a daybook, which is his method of getting organized. We see Jim’s daybook as a helpful tool that helps us plan instruction in a logical way, in much the same way as we like to keep our desks neat and tidy. Though we do use daybook planners to reflect on and plan instruction, our view of daybooks is more like our closets than our desks—a place where we store things, throw things into when friends are coming over, stuff with the junk of our daily lives, and, every now and then, clean out in order to find something worth presenting to someone else. Daybooks for us are thinking tools. As teachers we use them throughout our day to reflect and to research, and we ask our students to use them in our classrooms to research and think about their worlds.

The daybook, as we understand it, has a long history. Back in the fifth century BC, Protagoras, a sophist, kept records of important arguments and key concepts that were otherwise only preserved in memory. These records were called “commonplace books,” and they were used from the classical period through the nineteenth century as a valuable tool for educating young minds. *Commonplacing* required students to enter important passages from literature and at times comment on those passages. In the seventeenth century, these books were known as *silva rerum* (“a forest of things”). These forests held beautiful passages and important arguments that could be called upon to apply to many different situations. People were considered truly knowledgeable if they could remember

and quote important passages from their commonplace book (Knoblauch and Brannon 1984).

More directly, we take the term *daybook* from Donald Murray, who kept a daybook throughout his writing. In 1986, he gave this advice to scholars in rhetoric and composition:

Keep a planning notebook with you to play in at the office, at home, in the car, or the airplane, at faculty meetings (especially at faculty meetings), while you're watching television, sitting in a parking lot or eating a lonely lunch. . . . The notebook, which I call a daybook, will make it possible for you to use fragments of time, and fragments of time are all that most of us really have. Fifteen minutes, ten, five, two, one, less. In this book you can make lists, notes, diagrams, collect the quotes and citations, paste in key articles and reference, sketch outlines, draft titles, leads, endings, key paragraphs that will make it possible for you to be ready to write when you have an hour, or two, or three clear. (148)

Our daybooks draw from this rich history; we ask students to use them to write about their lives, to keep track of their thinking, and to notice all the world around them with open eyes and ears and hearts. In our daybooks, there's all kinds of writing that just doesn't fit anywhere else: bumper sticker slogans that got us laughing when we were waiting at a stoplight (one Lil saw last week was, "Huked on Foniks reely worked fur me"); pieces of language that moved us (one golden line that Cindy loved is, "We grow into new selves with every sentence we write, with every choice we make among the almost endless set of possibilities for their construction. To fail in that articulation is to foreclose on our identities, to cut short the process of discovering ourselves in thought" [Imbrie 1999]). Daybooks have become a valuable tool in our classrooms—we want to share that learning and excitement with you.

What Grade Levels Are Daybooks Right For?

Each of us has taught either elementary school, middle school, high school, or college, and some of us have taught a combination of all the above. (Lil, Sally, and Cindy have taught middle, high school, and college students; Karen has taught elementary, middle, high school, and college students; Tony has taught elementary and college students; Shana has taught high school and college students.) When we taught in college for the first time, we all had almost the exact same experience. While we were home in the quiet of our studies, as the first day approached, we thought, "What am I doing?" We became so nervous at the prospect

of teaching nineteen-year-olds that we stayed awake all night. Finally, at about two in the morning, we had an idea. If we could just write down what we would do for the first two weeks of class, we knew we would be well on our way. The plans we all wrote looked very much like what we had written for our elementary, middle, or high school students. The plans were driven by a common goal of helping our students realize that they are writers. No matter the age or grade level of our students now, the way we approach writing instruction in our classrooms from the first day is by having students think, write, and reflect. All of this thinking, writing, and reflecting is captured in our daybooks.

From this shared experience, we knew that the ways we teach writing, from fourth grade to college composition, were not that different. We knew as teachers that all of our students are writers, and their needs are very similar. Whether in the college or the seventh-grade classroom we had students who hated to write and students who had filled a couple dozen journals. In fourth grade or twelfth, we all had students who needed us a lot and students we would not get to know at all. In our sixth-grade classroom we had students whose thoughts were as deep as any high school student we had taught. And in our college classes we had some interesting "middle-grades thinkers." So we have found ideas from across the spectrum of grades helpful in meeting the needs for all the learners in our classes. With a bit of tweaking, what works for college students can and does also work for elementary children.

Cindy will tell you that she has learned more about teaching reading and writing for high school students from Karen's and Tony's elementary classrooms than anywhere else. Shana says maybe it's because teachers of older children assume too much about what kids already know. Cindy used to think it was because elementary teachers weren't as pressured by content, but Tony and Karen have shown her that their pressures are just as heavy, not to mention they've got all subject areas to deal with.

Karen and Tony will tell you they learn a lot by hanging out with middle, secondary, and college teachers. They like to talk theory and find the validation and the sources that support their teaching practices. Karen and Tony always take any high school or college classroom idea and instantly transform it to what will work with their school children. They always say, "My kids can do that!" Conversely, they like seeing how what they are doing with second or fourth graders is adapted by teachers of upper grades.

We develop as teachers by learning from each other. We invite you to join us by reading this book in whatever way works best for you. One strategy is to read straight through to the end, which is the best way to take in the wide range of our teaching experiences, grade levels, and the theory our practices are based on.

Use the internarrative connection boxes—the 4–6 Connection Box, the 6–12 Connection Box, and the 4–12 Connection Box—to help you adapt the ideas to the grade level you are currently teaching.

If you feel overwhelmed with the business of teaching, however, below are some other strategies to help you parse through some of the book's content and get you started with daybooks. We know that once daybooks become a part of your classroom, you'll find yourself returning to the book to learn more about them. The most important thing is for you to get started.

- Read through the practices and save the theory, denoted in shaded theory boxes, for reference or to enlighten a misguided administrator who questions what you are doing.
- Follow the strand for the level you teach. Just look for the name of the person you've connected with in each chapter. As you read what they have to say, you will find them pointing to other authors/teachers in the book.

Who Are We?

We came together as teachers of writing in the UNC Charlotte Writing Project, a site of the National Writing Project. Writing is what brought us together, and writing is what has kept us together, sharing our classrooms and our teaching. This book invites you into our community of writers and teachers to learn and share with us about how writing can become a valuable tool for learning and exploring and for having those thoughts visible for reflection and analysis.

Lil began her career in 1973 as a middle and high school English teacher in rural Celeste, Texas, population 719. She taught eighth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-grade English and coached junior high and high school girls basketball. She only tells her good friends about her coaching gig, because she doesn't want anyone to know that she had the state championship high school, class B team. In Texas, she is probably the only winning coach in the entire state not to become a principal. She became a college professor instead. She has spent the last twenty-five years working with teachers on teaching writing. She has worked in North Carolina and New York State, with teachers in the New York City Writing Project and the Capital Area Writing Project at the University at Albany, State University of New York, and now she directs the UNC Charlotte Writing Project.

Cindy started teaching in 1996 and managed to coach cross-country early on. As a beginning teacher she was totally focused on the North Carolina tenth-grade

writing test, relishing in the report card at the end of the year, and drilling students mercilessly to ensure that the writing said exactly what she wanted it to say. After three years of writing all of her students' work for them in five perfectly formed paragraphs, she was exhausted. Lil made her come to the UNC Charlotte Writing Project, and this experience kept her teaching. In the Writing Project Cindy discovered daybooks and got so reenergized that she wanted to pull strangers off the street into her living room so that she could teach them to write in new ways. In the Writing Project she discovered that she needed to throw out everything she was doing in the English classroom, and bring in all the hands-on, experiential activities she learned from coaching cross-country. She needed to roll up her sleeves and get down and dirty with her students as writers.

Since 1974, Karen has taught in elementary schools, middle and high schools, and the college classroom. Currently, she is a literacy coach at an urban elementary Title I school. She joined the writing project in 1985, kicking and screaming, because she couldn't imagine spending five weeks writing. She didn't see herself as a writer. The experience of writing and of being in a community of dedicated teachers changed her life. She changed the way she viewed the goals of teaching. Before the Writing Project she valued the *products* her students created and gave little thought to learning that occurs throughout the *process*. The Writing Project helped her look at the child and value each child's path for reaching curricular goals. She also began to see herself as a researcher, talking to her students, asking them what worked and what needed work, and using their responses to change her lessons to better meet their needs. In 1993, she became a literacy coach, applying the same principles that she used with children to helping teachers.

Tony was badgered every year for more than ten years by Karen to become involved in the Writing Project. Tony was a social studies guy, and he loved making the world and social issues come alive to his fourth graders. Summers for Tony were spent working on new social studies activities and working with teachers to make social studies more important in the elementary school classroom. In 2002, Tony caved. He decided it was time to get Karen off his back and see what all this writing stuff was about. He got turned on to writing, returned to school with his Sponge Bob daybook, and now has his children writing throughout the curriculum. Social studies has never been so good.

Sally began her career as a writer, a reporter for a small-town newspaper in North Carolina. Teaching is her second career, one where she brings her love of writing into the lives of hundreds of high school students each year. Don't ask her about them unless you have an hour or two to spare. She will show you each one's latest endeavor (all one hundred of them) that she has saved for posterity

on her jump drive (that is, if she can find her jump drive). Sally is always ahead of the curve. She was blogging with her students when the rest of us were still using our Commodore 64s; her students were producing movies when the rest of us were trying to figure out how to make points fly in PowerPoint. Now that she's approaching retirement, she's channeling some of her creative energy into completing a Ph.D.

With a background in high school English education and a Master's degree in English, Shana is the youngest of the group, but she is wise beyond her years (or at least we let her think she is). Whether preparing tenth-grade students for the writing test, helping seniors apply for college, or introducing college freshmen to the rigors of postsecondary education, Shana has been immersed in the teaching of writing. So, when she started her Ph.D. in Literacy and English Education, getting involved with the UNC Charlotte Writing Project was a no-brainer. Calling upon her teaching and coaching skills (Shana also played college soccer and coached high school and college), she approaches the teaching of writing with passion and encourages leadership in her classroom. The Writing Project has provided her with a theoretical knowledge and a network of teachers she needed to pursue her desire to rethink the way writing is taught in kindergarten through college.

Some of Our Encounters with Daybooks

► Lil

In the summer of 1981, when I first team-taught a course with James Britton, I noticed that he carried with him a small 3-by-5-inch notebook that he could slip into his pocket. At dinner one night, I asked him, "Jimmy, what is that you are carrying?"

"Oh, this is my daybook."

"Your what?"

"My daybook. Look. I make notes throughout my day, notes about everything, where I am, what I'm doing, things people say. It's a way for me to keep track and to think about things that matter to me. It gives me a history to return to. In one of my daybooks I have a note about receiving a call from Gordon Pradl. He was at Harvard at that time, and had read some of my work. That call changed the course of my academic life. My daybook allowed me to record that moment. And now, I treasure returning to those thoughts. What I'm interested in right now are my interactions with my granddaughter. I record things she says and does, just

as I record things that are happening in our class. You'll see some of those stories in my academic work to come."

I did see how Jimmy was able to use his daily encounters with his granddaughter to illustrate his theory of writing, how it moves from the expressive, from that language that is close to ourselves, the language we think in, to what Jimmy called the transactional, the more academic and public discourses we teach in school.

Cindy

When I was in high school and college, I was drawn to those pretty flowered journals that they sold in bookstores. I couldn't leave a store without purchasing one, and I would spend days imagining how neat it would be to write wonderfully profound thoughts that would live long after I was dead. That image made it totally impossible to write anything. When I would try anyway, my thoughts were messy, nothing that I would want anyone to see at any time, much less after I was dead. When I got over trying to be profound and would talk just about my life, I would live in fear that my parents or one of those stuck up girls in third period would find my journal and tease me mercilessly.

This was my pattern until graduate school where I was introduced to the daybook. The daybook was a messy, unorganized, free-for-all of thought, a place to stick and glue in the scraps of stuff I would accumulate—quotes, comic strips, postcards. And I didn't have to worry about anyone but me reading it. No one else would want to. At first I kept my daybooks in those pretty spiral notebooks, and I would take great pleasure in scribbling messily in it. I remember one day when Lil asked me, "How do you use that thing? I would be afraid I would mess it up." I showed her how I would scribble and not write at all on the lines. The lines were too far apart.

Daybooks quelled my fears. Losing the fear, the fear of others seeing my mess and the fear of making mess, freed me to be a writer.

Shana

When I first started working with Cindy and Lil in the Writing Project, I wanted to keep my daybook on my laptop. I wanted to be efficient. I wanted to maximize my time and effort. I had goals: Write to publish; be right from the start. I remember asking Cindy, "Would it be OK for me to use my laptop for in-class writing instead of this composition book?" I was thinking, "how high school is this—a composition book for writing." Cindy said gently, "Please try the composition book

for a couple of weeks. Write there. Feel free to be messy, to slow down, to be quiet with yourself. We can revisit this after you give it a try." We never had to revisit the issue. There was something powerful about writing and thinking on paper, of having a place to write badly, to be inefficient, rambling, and unorganized.

Now that you know our stories, grab a pen and a composition notebook, read on, and create your own daybook encounters.